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ABSTRACT

Professors of rhetoric are viewing with concern the prospect of 15 years of declining enrollment in higher education. It has been speculated that the decline in enrollment will be less severe in large, well-established, urban institutions with low tuition, a clear mission or well-defined public image, well-planned modest growth, established programs in the health professions, moderate graduate enrollment and specialization, good financial conditions, and management that is willing to face financial facts and be responsive to those providing support. Research suggests that by 1986 fine arts enrollment will be little changed, letters enrollment will be considerably down, and health profession and communications enrollments will be significantly up. Some ways to turn adversity to advantage are tied to demands of employers who want employees who can write well. Teachers of speech communication might emphasize writing speeches and might develop closer alliances with journalism, advertising, and public relations. In addition, increased emphasis on speech pathology, audiology, and training of the speech or hearing handicapped and their teachers could help forestall the enrollment decline that seems in store for the field of letters, including speech communication. (TJ)

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Speech Communication: 1986

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"Our struggle in life requires two virtues, bravery and wisdom--readiness to endure a danger and skillful knowledge of how to manage it."[1] So said Gorgias, professor of rhetoric in Greece of the fifth century B.C., and so might we.

Professors of rhetoric in the United States today are ready to brave perhaps fifteen years of decline in enrollments of higher education. Skillful knowledge of how best to manage that decline remains to be shown.

My aim today is to describe the coming decline as it is likely to affect the economic and political health of speech communication in our colleges and universities. Then I should suggest some probable ways in which to cut the losses and perhaps make a gain or two.

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The reasons for showing the danger and suggesting ways to manage are three. First, the effects of the decline upon colleges and universities have been discussed widely while field-specific effects have been neglected. Next, the strategies for different kinds of institutions have been explored while possibly fruitful courses of actions for particular disciplines have discussed in private but not much public. And finally one owes allegiance to colleagues in one's field elsewhere as well as at home.

Standard forecasts of the effects of the decline are easy to find.[2] Perhaps the most widely cited of these is the Carnegie Foundation's study, More than Survival.[3] After considering several sets of assumptions about the future, the authors concluded that some kinds of institutions are likely to do better than others in enrollments. The most-favored institutions are seen as large well-established urban places having low tuition, clear mission or well-defined public image, well-planned modest growth, established programs in the health professions, moderate graduate enrollment and specialization, good financial condition, and management that is both willing to face financial facts squarely and be responsive to those who provide support.[4] Notice that the only field-specific criterion regards the health professions.

From the main categories of institutions, the authors selected three as having some advantage in enrollments: public community colleges, universities (especially multi-campus universities), and highly selective liberal arts colleges. Three categories of institutions were seen as having less advantage than the others: private community colleges, comprehensive colleges and comprehensive universities with limited doctoral capacity (especially private ones), and less-selective liberal arts colleges.[5]

The usual advice on academic institutional policy is implicit in these selections. Keep a balanced budget, seek low-cost high-benefit debt, expand at a moderate pace when growth is possible, have a well-defined mission and image, respond to both private and public monies, favor well-established programs of high quality, support existing programs in the health professions, limit graduate studies and the specializations, and prune both programs for which financial support declines and those in which good quality is lacking.

To find recent field-specific forecasts one must turn to a publication such as Projections of Education Statistics to 1985-86 by Martin M. Frankel and Forrest W. Harrison of the National Center for Education Statistics.[6] Speech, debate, and forensic science (rhetoric and public address) were listed as a part of the field of letters, as were general English, English literature, comparative literature, classics,

linguistics (including phonetics, semantics, and philology), creative writing, teaching of English as a foreign language, philosophy, religious studies (excluding theological professions), and others.[7] Health professions included speech pathology and audiology, nursing (baccalaureate and higher programs), dentistry (D.D.S. or D.M.D.), medicine (M.D.), occupational therapy, optometry, pharmacy, and physical therapy, among 26 listings.[8] Fine and applied arts included dramatic arts with general fine arts, art (painting, drawing, and sculpture), art history and appreciation, music (performing, composition, and theory), music as a liberal arts program, music history and appreciation (musicology), dance, applied design (ceramics, weaving, textile design, fashion design, jewelry, metalsmithing, interior decoration, and commercial art), cinematography, photography, and others.[9] Communications included radio-television with general communications, journalism in printed media, advertising, communications media (use of videotape, films, etc. oriented specifically toward radio-television), and others.[10] Speech correction and education of the deaf were listed as parts of education.[11] Public relations was not listed at all.[12] Thus the projections were more broadly field-specific than some usual institutional definitions of speech communication, and some functions were allocated to two or more of the broad fields.

Given these limitations of definition, the procedure was to apply linear regression and curve-fitting techniques to data in the Education Directory of the National Center for Education Statistics.[13] College enrollments were projected from population aged 18-21 years, and bachelor's degrees were projected from first-time degree-credit enrollments 4 years earlier. For percentage that bachelors' degrees in letters were of all bachelors' degrees, the standard error of the estimate of degrees in letters conferred on men was .014 and degrees in letters conferred on women was 1.06.[14] These implicit reliabilities do not speak to the main assumptions one must make in accepting forecasts as valid. Some common assumptions are of normal economic conditions and normal trends in key demographic variables such as morbidity and mortality.

Estimates of the number of earned bachelor's degrees suggest that over the 8 years from 1977-1978 through 1985-1986 there will not be much change.[15] Figure 1 shows 1.6% fewer degrees being awarded at the end of the period than at the beginning. Some fields such as fine arts might be affected less than all fields. The change in fine arts is an estimated loss of 1.3%. Other fields might well see substantial changes. Communications would rise by 55.4%, health professions rise by 18.5% and letters fall by 32.5%.[16]

Some academic implications of these kinds of changes are not difficult to guess. Would-be entrants to the teaching of

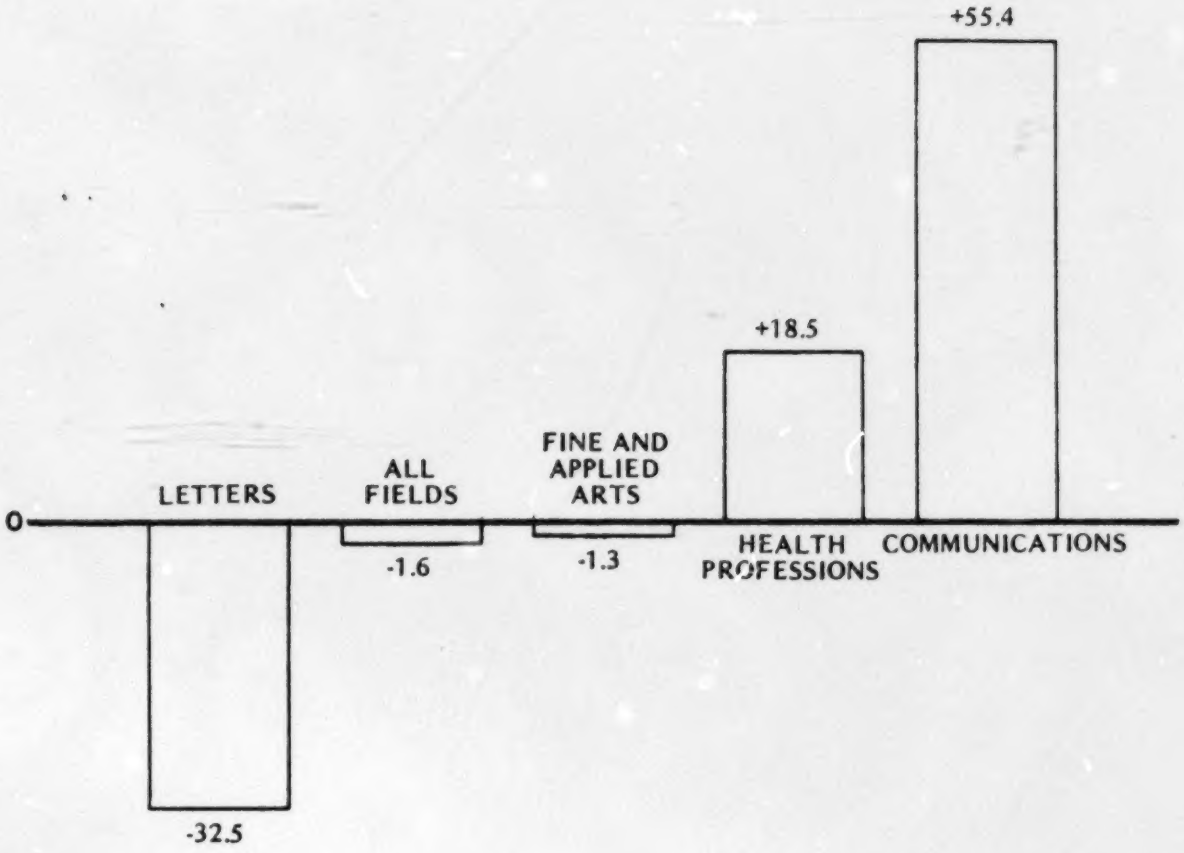

FIGURE 1

PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN ESTIMATED NUMBER OF EARNED BACHELOR'S DEGREES, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, 1977-1978 to 1985-86

Sources: Estimates by National Center for Education Statistics, 1977.
Percentages by Kenneth Harwood.

speech communication could not find much opportunity for appointment unless resignations and retirements exceed an average of 4% each year in the eight-year period. One is reminded that on average the trend is towards later retirement instead of earlier, notwithstanding recent intendedly temporary changes in federal statute.[17] If because of the effects of tenure the number of faculty members on the payrolls of colleges and universities is less elastic than it would be in the theoretical economic ideal of some institutional administrators, then one should assume a reduction in the student-teacher ratio. This reduction has occurred with declining enrollments in elementary and secondary schools.[18] Many professors and students will see the reduced ratios as an academic gain. Typically the decline in student-teacher ratios has set off a search for countervailing changes in curriculum. The most likely change has been to reduce the number of optional small-enrollment courses and increase the number of required large-enrollment courses. We should hear more and more of both core curricula and required courses. Less-popular undergraduate specialities are likely to disappear from the offerings, as are the smallest graduate seminars.

Changes in academic budgets are implied by a substantial decline in awards of baccalaureate degrees. New positions are scarce, if available. Existing positions are likely to be deleted if vacant. Salaries cannot rise much, if at all, against

declining student-teacher ratios. Graduate fellowships and assistantships become fewer, except at the expense of converting faculty positions to these. Part-time members of the faculty become fewer except for similar conversions of regular positions or removal of subventions to graduate students. Secretarial support, other staff support, supplies, travel allowances, and all other elements in the academic budget are subject to reductions.

These kinds of changes tend to be set in motion by any absolute decline in demand for services. An additional set of changes is likely to result when some fields decline more than others. Figure 2 shows the changes in the estimated number of bachelor's degrees over the eight-year period from 1977-1978 through 1986-1986.[19] Two kinds of change are notable. First, letters, fine and applied arts, and communications were estimated to be much more nearly equal in volume at the end of the period than at the beginning. Second, the order of volume among these fields was estimated to change, with letters falling below fine arts near the middle of the period and below communications near the end; with fine and applied arts ending the period as the largest of the three by keeping a more or less steady volume; and with communications rising rapidly from a position far below both letters and fine and applied arts at the beginning to a second position nearer its leader than its follower at the end of the period.

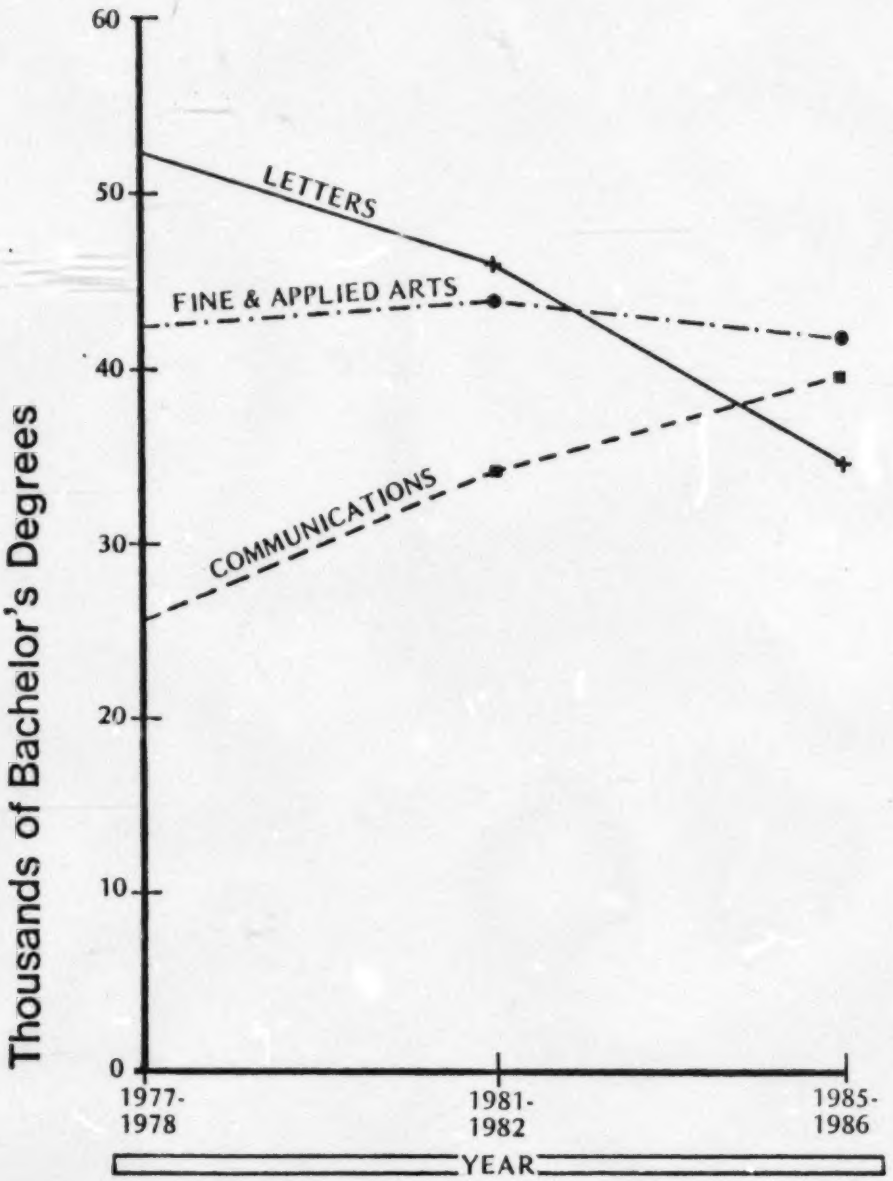

FIGURE 2

EARNED BACHELOR'S DEGREES, YEARLY
RATE, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,
1977-1978 to 1985-1986

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 1977.

Applied to any individual institution, these changes in relative position suggest that both economic wherewithall and political power might begin to shift during the eight-year period of the forecasts. Funds once assigned to letters might be reassigned to a rapidly growing field of communications. Although changes in the number of voting members of the faculty tend to come more slowly than changes in budget, continuation of the indicated trends might find professors of communications out-voting professors of letters near the end of the 'eighties. To put a fine point upon this observation, communications here means journalism and other sub-fields, and not speech communication and other sub-fields. Such a shift in power might well affect the continuing struggle over basic curricular requirements at both the undergarduate level and the graduate.

Gloomy as most of the foregoing considerations might seem to faculties in speech communication, happy scenarios to 1986 and beyond are quite possible. The potential joy comes from three main sources. The definitions and procedures of the study upon which the gloom is founded might not apply to the real future of speech communication. Beyond the hope of a faulty forecast lies the skill to find successful ways in which to turn adversity to advantage. And beyond the skill lies the will to do so.

Underlying the bright forecast for communications and the gloomy forecast for letters are the probable causes of demand

by employers for people who can write well and demand by student for skills that will get and keep employment for them. One does not hear employer after employer insist upon better abilities to speak. Some demand is there, and more might be stimulated on behalf of speaking, but the heavy demand is for writing. All of that might change by 1986, but I doubt it. The legacy of the 'sixties and the 'seventies is a perceived decline in abilities to read and write more than speak and listen. That legacy will not disappear in a few years any more than its appearance came to be in a few years. Departments of English have not responded fully to the societal demand for better writing. Typical English departments appear to be more interested in teaching advanced literature than basic composition. They seem likely to suffer from that imbalance of interest far into the 'eighties, if not beyond.

Potentially more favorable than any other change in the teaching of speech communication is to increase greatly the emphasis upon the writing of speeches. Supervised exercises in speech writing seem likeliest to help students to get the basic skill in communication for which employers seem most eager to pay. Assumptions that rhetoric is and should be an oral art to the exclusion of being written, or that written rhetoric should not be taught in speech communication, need immediate and close reexamination. The teaching of writing

is a chief responsibility in speech communication. Further neglect of speech writing is likely to contribute to the probable decline in enrollments. Strong attention to speech writing might well slow the decline, stop it, or reverse it.

Other actions might be highly favorable to speech communication. Closer alliance with journalism, advertising, and other elements of communications stands at the top of the list. The most natural bridge between speech communication and communications might be in curricula for public relations. Growth in demand for public relations workers is expected to be faster than average in the years ahead.[20] Important skills in public relations are the abilities to persuade and to inform. Surely speech communication has much to offer in forwarding these skills, if not most to offer in teaching the ethics of persuasion.

Health science aspects of speech communication appear to have especially favorable futures and thus should be developed further.[21] In addition to fostering the growth of speech pathology, audiology, training of the speech or hearing handicapped and their teachers, and the speech and hearing sciences, teaching and research in health communication are likely to be areas of growth to 1986 and later.

Increased attention to writing, public relations, and the health sciences as subject-matter could forestall the decline that seems to be in store for the field of letters,

including speech communication. It might even create some gains.

If the will to endure danger is our first virtue in the years ahead, the will to manage danger skillfully should be our next virtue. At least that's what Gorgias is presumed to have said. And someone wrote that, too.

NOTES

[1]Philip Wheelwright, ed., The Presocratics (New York: The Odyssey Press, Inc., 1966), p. 238.

[2]E.g., Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, Priorities for Action: Final Report of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), pp. 177-178; Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, A Digest of Reports of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1974), p. 77; and Roy Radner, Leonard S. Miller et al., Demand and Supply in U. S. Higher Education (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975), p. 324.

[3]Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, More than Survival: Prospects for Education in a Period of Uncertainty (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1975).

[4]Ibid., pp. 70-74.

[5]Ibid., p. 76. Advantages and disadvantages of differences in projected regional growth are ignored here, although the South and West are expected to grow more than twice as fast as the Northeast region and the North Central from 1975 to 2000. According to U. S. Department of Commerce News release C878-207 of October 13, 1978.

[6]Martin M. Frankel and Forrest W. Harrison, Projections of Education Statistics to 1985-86 (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1977), pp. 35-41.

[7]Ibid., p. 118.

[8]Ibid., p. 119.

[9]Ibid., p. 117.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid., p. 119.

[12]Ibid., pp. 117-120.

[13]Ibid., pp. 91-92.

[14]Ibid., pp. 99-100.

[15]Ibid., p. 35, with summary values aggregated by Kenneth Harwood.

[16]Ibid., with rates of change calculated by Kenneth Harwood.

[17]Matthew W. Finkin, Merton C. Bernstein, Maryse Eymonerie et al., "The Impact of Federal Retirement-Age Legislation on Higher Education: A Report of the Special Committee on Age Discrimination and Retirement," AAUP Bulletin, 64 (September, 1978), 181-192.

[18]Susan Abramowitz and Stuart Rosenfeld, eds., Declining Enrollment: The Challenge of the Coming Decade (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, March, 1978), p. 347.

[19]Frankel and Harrison, loc. cit.

[20]U. S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, 1978-1979 Edition (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1978), p. 155.

[21]Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, p. 73.